

***Wilderness Act Allows for Mining in Designated Wilderness Areas, a note from Keith Lannom, Payette National Forest Supervisor***

In the coming weeks, you are likely to hear about proposed mineral activities in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area. I'd like to provide background information as to the laws governing mining on National Forests and the Golden Hand project.

Does mining take place on National Forest System land? Yes, it does. Our National Forest System is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, which is a multiple use agency, meaning that land uses are allowable for the greatest good, for the greatest number of people. Mining is an allowable use of the forest lands and the Payette National Forest has a long history of mining activities as provided for by federal mining laws.

Is mining allowable within a designated wilderness area? Yes. As a result of the negotiations that designated the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, Congress has allowed mining in wilderness areas by passing the Wilderness Act of 1964 and subsequently the 1980 Central Idaho Wilderness Act.

We know that mining can be a contentious issue with members the public actively opposing or actively in favor of mining within National Forests. Mining within a designated wilderness area is likely to bring more people to the table to discuss the pros and cons, but it is important for everyone to know that mining activities, such as mineral claims validation work within designated wilderness, are allowable by law.

Federal mining laws dictate that the mining can take place, and the Forest Service does not have the ability to circumvent those laws. For all mining activities on National Forest lands, federal law dictates that the Forest Service is responsible for the surface resources. This means mining claims can be worked, and the Forest Service sets the standards on how disturbances to the surface resources are avoided or mitigated.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Forest Service studies the potential impacts to the surface resources and sets standards specific to the mining operation in question. The public has the opportunity to comment on the standards proposed by the Forest Service, but it's important to know that as provided by federal law, the question before the public is not *should mining activities take place* but rather, *has the Forest Service required the mining company to adequately provide for the protection of natural resources on the surface such as vegetation, fisheries, clean water, wildlife, wildlife habitat and visual impacts* – all things that are above the ground.

The Payette National Forest is working with several owners of mining claims. One such project is the Golden Hand #1 and #2 Lode Mining Claims, Plan of Operations that proposes to conduct claim validation work. The Golden Hand claims were established in 1889 and the Forest Service has worked with the various owners of the Golden Hand claims for over 100 years. The project at this point is not the operation of a full scale gold mine. It is only work to determine the validity of claims, which could require the use of motorized equipment inside the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area,

near Big Creek. The Payette National Forest has conducted an Environmental Impact Study (EIS), and on January 2nd will release the Final EIS and the Draft Record of Decision for this project.

You have an opportunity to submit your comments, but remember, the question is not whether or not work on these mining claims should take place in the wilderness as that question has already been asked and answered by Congress through numerous mining laws and the passage of the Wilderness Act. You have the opportunity to provide comment on whether or not you think the Forest Service is requiring the mining company to adequately provide for the safeguarding of surface natural resources within the wilderness area.

If you have questions about this project, please come to us as we will gladly provide information that that will allow you to gain a full understanding of the project and its long history so you can best form your opinion. We have posted the full project file on our website at:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/payette/goldenhand>